

THOMAS HOLCROFT: RADICAL AND MAN OF LETTERS

A Portion of

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY IN CONFORMITY WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1934

BY

VIRGIL RUDOLPH STALLBAUMER

BALTIMORE

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SUMMARY OF

THOMAS HOLCROFT: RADICAL AND MAN OF LETTERS

Thomas Holcroft: Radical and Man of Letters is a study of the once popular works of Holcroft (1745-1809), who, though now practically forgotten, was in his day so well known as an outstanding English supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution, as the translator of widely read contemporary works, and especially as the author of *The Road to Ruin* (1791), *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), and *Travels from Hamburg . . . to Paris* (1804), that Hazlitt, the greatest essayist of the century, made him the subject of a life.

A study of Holcroft's four novels shows that he, even more than other novelists between 1780 and 1800, gave increasing attention to plot and characterization. The preface to *Alwyn: or the Gentleman Comedian* (1780) as well as its structure and Holcroft's reviews in the *Monthly Review* from 1792 to 1796 indicate that Fielding and dramatic theory in general promoted unity, probability, and characterization in the novel during its disintegration after the death of the first great masters. Although an outstanding example of plotting and compression, *Anna St. Ives* (1792) is marred by the general defect of the early doctrinaire novel—inability to fuse fiction and doctrine into a totality; and though *Hugh Trevor* (1794-97) is an unhappy attempt to combine the picaresque pattern with the plotted novel, its relatively vivid characterization, forceful style, and thoughtful subject-matter prepared the way for the novel of the succeeding generation.

While Holcroft's plays are typical of the prevalent plunderings of foreign pieces, they nevertheless indicate that even as early as 1785 the only road to success was to depict life in caricature and sentimentally. Holcroft's stagepieces and their history show that regardless of his neo-classical literary tastes, his talent for satire, and his consistent praise of comedy as the real dramatic art, his ardent ambition to succeed forced him to cater more and more to the growing demands of sentimentalism, culminating in the once famous *Road to Ruin* (1791) and the first true melodrama, *A Tale of Mystery* (1803). Up

to 1791, as is clear from *The School for Arrogance*, he invariably tried to be comic, but subsequently, though still injecting considerable of the comic spirit into his pieces, he compromised more and more with sentimentalism so that his plays became increasingly popular in proportion to his yielding to popular demands. Hence we cannot conclude that an author's personal taste was for sentimental comedy and melodrama merely because he wrote such types of plays. He may simply have been following the dictates of the public.

His miscellaneous work, undertaken mainly because of the failure of his plays and because of political hostility, brought him in touch with almost every literary activity and social trend peculiar to his age. Though his voluminous translation work, because of the new trends revealed, is evidence that he had a keen journalistic sense of what would be popular, his own neo-classical standards appear in his concern for morality in education as opposed to the utilitarian and practical in the new education, for simplicity and regularity in architecture, and for form, finish, and perfection in poetry. As a translator of widely read works on education, biography, physiognomy, and travel he was singularly painstaking and scrupulously honest with his English readers. As a reviewer he took his duties seriously and was strikingly impartial.

As a member of the Godwin circle, which was not satisfied with remodelling the old order but was eager to build anew on reason and nature, Holcroft caught up the new ideals and outlined a perfect commonwealth in *Anna St. Ives* (1792) where truth and reason would be the only standards, where all would live for the common good, and where justice would be the social bond. Having thus shown the way to an ideal and purely natural existence, he next set out in *Hugh Trevor* (1794-97) to demolish the church, society, and government. He did so with particular vehemence because he considered that he had been a victim of their prejudice and power. With the bulwarks of ignorance and prejudice battered down, the spread of truth was to be unimpeded, men were to live like brothers without distinction of birth and position, to labor not for self but for the common good, and to find their greatest happiness not in power and wealth but in intellectual pursuits. Moreover, under these utopian conditions the human mind would be so continually progressive that ignorance, disease, and even death would be no more.

But with the turn of the tide of popular opinion against France and its levelling and perfectibilitarian theories, the very radicalism that heightened the popularity of his work between 1791 and 1794 went out of fashion, and Holcroft was crushed by the rebound of public opinion. In vain he tried to clear himself from his public indictment, and in vain he attempted to prove that all he demanded of the government was justice. Neither the government nor public opinion would acquit him. After 1794 radicalism was read into even the most banal and commonplace utterances of his plays and this relentless opposition was augmented by his unwillingness to curb his tendency to satirize mankind. The facts show that public hostility for a time broke his proud, ambitious and highly sensitive spirit, and even impaired his faculties; for no single work subsequent to 1794 measures up to *Seduction*, *The School for Arrogance*, *The Road to Ruin*, and *Anna St. Ives*. Thus from 1794 on his life became more and more a hand to hand fight with a complication of diseases and poverty.

A comparative study of the life and works of Godwin and Holcroft reveals that of the two men Holcroft was more actively engaged in public affairs, more in touch with the semi-radical theories expressed in books intended for the education of youth, and more closely associated with the French by reason of his two visits to Paris before he met Godwin in 1788. But he, like Godwin, became a radical only under the impact of the French revolution. Aside from encouraging Godwin's atheistic tendencies, helping him to dissociate his idea of government from his concept of rule by political justice and affording intellectual stimulus, the influence Holcroft brought to bear upon his friend was not profound; for the most part it resulted, as far as the works indicate, from his character rather than from his principles or learning. Holcroft being an enthusiast, a visionary, and an ardent admirer of Godwin's talent, and having espoused the cause of perfectibility with his characteristic enthusiasm, stimulated his phlegmatic associate, as Godwin acknowledges. Moreover, the elder radical, imbued as he was with the doctrine that wealth, time, and talent must be used to promote the good of the community, may have urged upon Godwin the duty of writing *Political Justice*. Holcroft's influence as an "oral instructor" must, in the light of available facts, be limited in the main to the assistance he rendered by discussion, encouragement, direction, and stimulus.

The completion of *The Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft* by William Hazlitt was not altogether a work of Hazlitt's own choice; it was thrust upon him by a committee of Holcroft's friends and made unpleasant and difficult because of their bickerings and unwillingness to cooperate. It is eulogistic rather than critical and the three most prominent facets of Holcroft's character, his inordinate vanity, his irascibility, and his atheism are passed over in silence; the tragic suicide of his son, William, is presented as the case of an ungrateful and wayward youth, rather than as the result of an unduly rigorous and almost cruel discipline; and Holcroft's surrender for trial is depicted as an act of martyr-like courage, though Holcroft's own writings force the conclusion that he was motivated largely by a dread of disgrace and by an eagerness to vindicate himself before the world. Finally, Hazlitt's criticism of Holcroft as a literary figure is disappointing and inadequate. The only feature of Holcroft's life upon which Hazlitt enters with his characteristic enthusiasm is his discussion of Holcroft's perfectibilitarianism, his optimism, and his forward-looking attitude of mind.

THOMAS HOLCROFT: A SATIRIST IN THE STREAM OF SENTIMENTALISM

By VIRGIL R. STALLBAUMER

When Thomas Holcroft came to town, like Molière, after years of experience as a strolling player, he felt he was ready to turn playwright; for he had been "highly approved in the country." During his years of apprenticeship from 1770 to 1781, he had no doubt learned what every actor and playwright experiences: that success comes from giving the public what it wants. But to cater to popular taste was difficult during these decades; for the London critics and audiences were not only vehemently censorious, but of divided tastes. William Nicholson, a lifelong friend of Holcroft, in the prolog written for Holcroft's first published play, *Duplicity*, left this picture of the shoals upon which the aspiring playwright might easily meet disaster:

Long may his hunger last, who pines for fame,
Who seeks that hard-earn'd morsel call'd—A NAME!
A morsel clos'd within a scaly guard
Of critic shells, obdurate, rough, and hard!
Well fare the bard, whose fortitude, sedate,
Stands, unappall'd, before impending fate;
When cat-call-pipers, groaners, whistlers, grinners,
Assembled, sit to judge of SCRIBBLING SINNERS!

To make matters worse, the war between sentimental comedy and comedy of manners with its farcical tendencies was at its height when Holcroft decided to turn author. Sheridan, having taken up the cause of the theater as entertainment now that Goldsmith had been silenced by death in 1774 and having been emboldened by the final triumph of *The Rivals*, pointedly remarked in the prolog to that work, spoken on the tenth night by Mrs. Bulkley:

Look on her well [pointing to the figure of Comedy]—does
she seem form'd to teach?
Should you expect to hear this lady preach?
Is grey experience suited to her youth?
Do solemn sentiments become that mouth?
Bid her be grave, those lips should rebel prove
To every theme that slanders mirth or love.

But sentimentalism had two staunch defenders in Hugh Kelly and Richard Cumberland. The cause of sentimental comedy was furthered by such successes as: Hugh Kelly's *False Delicacy* (1768) and *A School for Wives* (1773); Richard Cumberland's *West Indian* (1771) and *The Fashionable Lover* (1772); Mrs. Hannah Cowley's *The Runaway* (1776); Henry Brooke's *The Contending Brothers* (1777); Mrs. Elizabeth Griffith's *The Times* (1779); and Sophia Lee's *The Chapter of Accidents* (1780). But the comedy-of-manners camp had even more powerful forces: Goldsmith with *The Good Natur'd Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773); Samuel Foote with his slashing burlesque, *The Handsome Housemaid, or Piety in Pattens* (1773); Colman, the Elder, with *The Man of Business* (1774); Sheridan with *The Rivals* (1775); Arthur Murphy with *News from Parnassus* (1776); Sheridan again with *The School for Scandal* (1777); Murphy in a second attack with *Know Your Own Mind* (1777); and finally Sheridan for a third time with the devastating *Critic* (1779).¹

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With such an array of forces, the fledgling playwright seemingly had no recourse but to choose between "laughing" and "weeping" comedy; that is, whether he would side with Goldsmith and Sheridan or with Hugh Kelly and Cumberland. But Holcroft, either because he was without definite theories on comedy or because he was too eager to succeed, offered in his first published play, *Duplicity*, both "precept and example" and amusement bordering even on farce. Two passages in his preface to *Duplicity* favor the interpretation that his ideas on comedy were hazy and that he was content to be on both sides—to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds—so long as his play succeeded:

The English Comic Drama has long been renowned for humour; and when, about fourteen years ago, the French *Comédie Lar-moyante*, or, as we call it, Sentimental Comedy, was introduced,

¹ A detailed discussion of the conflict between sentimental and genuine comedy is given by Ernest Bernbaum, *The Drama of Sensibility*, Cambridge, 1925, pp. 224-68; G. H. Nettleton, *English Drama of the Restoration*, New York, 1923, pp. 268 ff.; and Allardyce Nicoll, *Late Eighteenth Century Drama*, Cambridge, 1927, pp. 171 ff.

the complaint was, that we had lost all the spirit of our old writers, and were dwindled into mere translators. The town was in this temper when Dr. Goldsmith's Comedy of *She Stoops to Conquer* was produced, in which, humour, alone, seems to be the chief intention of the Author, and which gave a fatal blow to mere sentimental dialogue. The success of this piece roused later writers from the soft slumbers of the heart, and wit and humour became commodities in great request. The road to fame, though difficult, was obvious; and it would have been unpardonable for a young traveller, at his first out-set, so far to have mistaken, as not to have attempted it. The difficulties and dangers have increased, however, in a vast proportion. I need only mention the *School for Scandal*, and every discerning critic will immediately recollect how, and why (ed. 1781, p. iv).

Whatever the execution may have been, the intention of this Comedy [*Duplicity*] is of a far nobler nature than the mere incitement of risibility: the vice it pretends to correct is become truly enormous; and I would rather have the merit of driving one man from the gaming-table, than of making a whole theatre merry (*ibid.*, p. vi).

Indicative of his later alertness to pounce upon what was new and popular is this open avowal that *Duplicity* appealed both to laughter and to tears. Apparently he was so conscious of the "difficulties and dangers" of trying to succeed with brilliant and witty comedy and so awed by even the mention of *The School for Scandal* that he could not rest satisfied, as did Goldsmith and Sheridan, with throwing in a few passages of sentimental dialog and a few touching scenes. Thus, though the preface makes it clear that he did the only thing an aspiring author dared do—follow the lead of Goldsmith and Sheridan—he nevertheless sought to please those who preferred a "sermon preached in acts."

It must be acknowledged, however, that not only Holcroft's eagerness to succeed but all his prepossessions induced him to follow the lead of Goldsmith and Sheridan; for his taste inclined toward the very satire eschewed by the sentimentalists. The preface to his first novel, *Alwyn* (1780), attacked the sentimentalism then rampant in prose fiction and probed the inherent weakness of this literary tendency. Furthermore, he had a decided preference for Pope, who "always continued a favorite with Mr. Holcroft, and held the highest place in his

esteem after Milton, Shakespere, and Dryden. He used often, in particular, to repeat the character of Atticus, which he considered the finest piece of satire in the language."² In principle, too, he was opposed to sentimentality. In his *Travels from Hamburg . . . to Paris*, 1804, he denounced the historian Saint Foix for glossing over the crimes of Marguerite de Valois by pleading that though she had "her lovers and a few foibles," she was "full of good intentions" and had the "best of hearts and the most noble of souls." Holcroft's condemnation is emphatic:

All this is very sentimental. . . . Let circumstances plead for persons, extenuate anger, and show the inefficacy and the injustice of punishment; but they should neither plead for nor palliate vice (ed. 1804, 2. 43).

Moreover, he had something of a genius for satire. This fact is most conspicuous in his novels; for as often as he indulged in satire it invariably got so much out of hand that the reader is at a loss to determine whether the author favors his villains, representing perverted social institutions, or his heroes, who stand for the dreams of perfectibility. Besides, his only poem of length, *Human Happiness* (1783), is a satire. Finally, his dramatic theory favored the use of ridicule as the means of enforcing moral improvement. In *Alwyn* he expresses the hope "to see the time when none shall have the power, and few the inclination, to oppress those people, who, under proper regulations would be our best moral teachers."³ This novel, by the way, is dedicated to Sheridan. In *Duplicity* his means of fulfilling the "dignified office of the dramatic poet," as he was wont to term it, was satire and ridicule as he acknowledged in the epilog:

And why, with so much rudeness and ill-nature,
'Gainst PRIVATE vice urge acrimonious satire? ⁴

² *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft*, in William Hazlitt, *Works*, ed. Waller-Glover, London, 1902, 2. 79.

³ Ed. 1780, 2. 32.

⁴ This interpretation is supported by a letter from Holcroft to Fulke Greville, September 4, 1781: "The work in question was to be a comedy, the auditors were to laugh; wit, humour, variety of character, of manners, of incident are absolute requisites for a good comedy, and as entirely so as instruction and reformation from the fable and moral" (*Memoirs*, p. 263).

Toward the close of his life, he again declared for satire, asserting that "to satirize those follies, and that ignorance, which are prejudicial to man, is the dignified office of the dramatic poet."⁵

To follow the English tradition of comedy and at the same time use the stage as a school of morality seems to have been Holcroft's aim. It remains to see to what extent he accomplished his purposes. In doing so, it is important for us to bear in mind that Holcroft, unlike Goldsmith, Sheridan, and Cumberland, had the advantage of neither college nor university training. The stage was his school as it had been that of Hugh Kelly. He accordingly formed his ideas from the dramas holding the boards in his day. His eleven years of contact with theatrical life as a strolling player afforded him a welter of models for imitation, and with these in mind he produced at the age of thirty-six his first published comedy, *Duplicity*⁶ (C. G., Oct. 13, 1781). Though the applause which greeted it, according to Hazlitt, "both on the first night and afterwards, was very great," its popularity was so ephemeral that Harris, who had accepted it for staging, refused to run it after the fourth night, saying, that "unless it were commanded by the king, he should not think of playing it any more."⁷

It consists of a welter of incidents, many of which border on farce. Most of the scenes center round the blunders of the whimsical Sir Hornet Armstrong. While at Bath, Sir Hornet sees Clara, decides that she will make his nephew, Sir Harry Portland, a good wife, and, though refraining through delicacy from speaking to her, questions one Squire Turnbull, an ignorant countrified boor whom he mistakes for Clara's brother. It so happens that Squire Turnbull has a sister, as ignorant and countrified as himself, whom he is trying to marry off; and, thinking the uncle is negotiating for his sister, the squire promises to further the match. To complicate matters still more—in fact, so much so that no reader can ever be certain

⁵ *Travels* 1. 420.

⁶ His earliest stage pieces were not printed and I have not seen the manuscripts.

⁷ *Memoirs*, p. 102. The judgment of Harris was eminently right. My study of the play causes me to demur against the estimate given by Allardyce Nicoll, p. 135, where he says: "Altogether this is an excellent comedy of sentimentalized manners and would be worthy of a revival."

he has untangled the plot—an old man whose humour is to think himself a gallant appears as Clara's suitor. After the story has hopelessly lost itself in one mistaken identity after another, and after the characters themselves scarcely know who's who and the reader has despaired of following the plot, the author makes Sir Hornet explain that all the misunderstandings originated through his studiously avoiding an interview with Clara "for fear the business should wear a face of precipitate indelicacy." This part of the plot is at best a string of farcical incidents.

The serious action centers round Sir Harry Portland's weakness for gambling. Having fallen in love with Clara, whom he met at Bath, Sir Harry feels he must give up gambling if he is to win her love. But he has already mortgaged all his property and is thus forced by circumstances to cast his last die. His friend, Osborne, has been leading him on and has been winning from him consistently. Sir Harry, instead of retrieving his fortunes, loses not only his remaining piece of property but even the twenty thousand his sister, Melissa, had entrusted to his keeping until she married Osborne. This act of perfidy causes such disgust in Sir Harry that he is on the point of killing himself, when Osborne, whose life Sir Harry had saved while travelling in France, brings him to his senses. Promising to amend, Sir Harry receives from Osborne all the property he had lost. The end shows Sir Harry and Clara vowing eternal love.

The preface and the general tenor of the play indicate that in so far as Holcroft aimed to amuse he thought he was imitating Goldsmith and Sheridan and believed that he was following the English tradition of comedy. The mistaken identity which plays so prominent a part is no doubt an aping of the mistakes figuring in *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Rivals* and in Restoration comedy in general. The ridicule heaped upon the ignorant boorish couple, Squire Turnbull and his sister, Barbara, is perhaps an imitation of the ridicule directed against country boors by such plays as Cumberland's *Choleric Man* (1774). Then there are strains of the "humour comedy" in the characters Vandervelt (acted by Holcroft himself) and Sir Hornet. Obvious attempts to imitate Sheridan and some of the farcical tendencies of his plays are numerous. A Mrs. Trim is lugged in by the heels to supply passages like this:

I am subject to the historicals, and troubled with the vapours; being as I am, of a dilikut nurvus system, whereof I am so giddy, that my poor head is sometimes quite in a whirlpool; and if I did not bathe with my lady, the doctor tells me, I should decline into a liturgy, and so fall down and die, perhaps, in a fit of apostacy (ed. 1781, p. 27).

A steward, Timid, affords amusement by his eternal trite phrases. Finally, the opposition to satire and ridicule is satirized; for example:

You're a wit, and I am an old fool—Sneering—ridiculing me—I hate wit and ridicule. . . . Me a wit. . . . Why a wit is a kind of urchin, that every man will set his dog at, but won't touch himself, for fear of pricking his fingers.—A wit is a monster, with a hideous long tongue, and no brains . . . and is only to be laid by a cudgel (*ibid.*, p. 26).

Yet Holcroft was by far too doctrinaire to let slip a chance of reforming men and manners. Here it is that he joined hands with the supporters of sentimental comedy. Sir Harry is not satirized out of his gambling, but is presented as an object of pity and compassion, and the efforts of Osborne to save him are held up for admiration and imitation. There is, it is true, little insistence upon the nobility of Sir Harry's character in other respects; neither is there much emphasis upon his efforts to overcome his weakness; for he is presented at that point in his career where he is too embroiled to gain anything by desisting. The serious plot, thus, comes under the denomination of sentimental comedy only in that the audience is expected to feel pity and compassion for a victim who has hopelessly entangled himself through his vices, and only in that the spectators are to admire the magnanimous virtue of a man who lays himself open to suspicion in order to save his friend, and in that it aims to correct, not folly, but vice; in other words, in so far as the elements of tragedy and comedy are here mingled.

What helps to enforce the view that Holcroft intended to imitate Goldsmith and Sheridan is that even Sir Harry, though in the main delineated tragically, contributes his share of amusement. In Act 3, Sc. 1, for example, Sir Harry in the presence of sixty-seven year old Vandervelt rehearses with Clara how he will make love to Miss Turnbull, and thus under the very eyes of Vandervelt makes love to the object of Vandervelt's

affections. *Duplicity* thus is by no means, as Professor Nicoll contends,⁸ a revolt against the reactionaries, Goldsmith and Sheridan. It is rather an attempt to follow the traditions of English comedy as Holcroft knew them in 1781. He had still to learn how best to make comedy serve a moral purpose as inculcated by the ancients and as practised in modern times by Jonson and Congreve, and to learn that moralizing is not drama. And that he should have fallen heir to the sentimental tendencies of his day and should have striven to satisfy the divided tastes was to be expected; for even Goldsmith and Sheridan were by no means consistently anti-sentimental, as is evident from the Lydia Languish sub-plot of *The Rivals*, the halo of success surrounding the wastrel Charles Surface, and the moralized ending of *The Good Natur'd Man*.

During the summer of 1785 Holcroft wrote *Seduction*, the second of his original comedies to appear in print. As acknowledged in the preface, its setting as well as the dissolute characters, Sir Frederick Fashion and Mrs. Modely, were taken from the popular French novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by P. A. F. C. Laclos (1741-1803). He submitted it to Harris, manager of Covent Garden, together with *The Cholerick Fathers*,⁹ with the agreement that if approved, "both were to be played, during the ensuing season, the first [*Cholerick Fathers*] in November, and the latter [*Seduction*] in January, or the beginning of February, 1786."¹⁰ Both pieces were accepted. But finding that *The Cholerick Fathers* did not succeed so well as expected, Harris returned the manuscript of *Seduction* for revision a second and third time; and, even though the author removed "a character so atrocious, yet so frequent, in this town, as to make, in the opinion of Mr. Harris, the representation of it dangerous," the comedy was finally rejected with the comment that "it could not succeed."¹¹ That the rejection followed the comparative failure of *The Cholerick Fathers*, is significant; for this "romantic opera," barring its sentimen-

⁸ P. 135.

⁹ I have omitted discussions of the romantic opera, *The Noble Peasant* (Haymarket, Aug. 2, 1784), *Follies of a Day* (C. G., Dec. 14, 1784) and *The Cholerick Fathers* (C. G., Nov. 10, 1785) since the little light they throw upon Holcroft's dramatic theory and practice supports the conclusions pointed to by his more important works.

¹⁰ *Seduction*, 1787, p. vi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

talized *dénouement*, is in the comic manner. Nothing remained but to offer *Seduction* to other managers. In 1787 it was staged at Drury Lane on the following nights: March 12, 13, 17, 19, 22, 24; April 12; May 1, 5. According to the *English Review* (10.249), it "met with a large share of public approbation." For his portion of the three nights Holcroft received somewhat more than two hundred and fifty pounds.¹²

The plot centers round the attempts of Sir Frederick Fashion to seduce a virtuous wife and an innocent girl. The fashionable libertine finds Lady Morden, once the pattern of wifely virtue, a willing flirt because she is seeking to avenge her husband's riotous and free living. Sir Frederick's designs are made still easier by Lord Morden's conviction that to be jealous or to offer opposition is unfashionable. The promise of another triumph, as a man of fashion, is offered by the scheme of Mrs. Modely, who, having been affronted by General Burland and knowing his hatred for men of fashion, seeks to make the general an object of sport by inducing Sir Frederick to elope with Burland's daughter, Emily. Sir Frederick succeeds so well that he finds Lady Morden ready to surrender herself on the very night set for his elopement with Emily. But he is outwitted by the counterplots of Gabriel Wilmot, the brother of Lady Morden, and by Harriet, a former victim of his philanderings.

Anyone familiar with *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which came out in 1782 and made Laclos famous, will recognize that Lady Modely is based upon the infernally clever, shameless, scheming Marquise de Merteuil, and that Sir Frederick Fashion is patterned after Vicomte de Valmont. Evidently Holcroft's unrevised manuscript depicted Lady Modely as the heroine "so atrocious . . . as to make . . . the representation dangerous." Acting upon the fears of Harris, Holcroft changed Marquise de Merteuil into the less wicked Mrs. Modely, who has no other motive than revenge for assisting Sir Frederick to elope with Emily. Sir Frederick, however, is the Valmont of Laclos. His attempt to seduce the virtuous Lady Morden synchronizes with Lady Modely's offer to help him elope with Emily, and thus parallels, for the most part, the situation of the novel; for the

¹² Elbridge Colby, *Memoirs of Holcroft*, newly edited, 2 vols., London, 1925, 1. 280.

narrative of Laclos presents Valmont as already intent upon conquering the supposedly unconquerable Mde. la Présidente de Tourvel at the time when the opportunity of a second conquest is offered him. Emily, like Cécile of the novel, is intended as a victim of the schemes of the two unprincipled characters. But unlike the plot of the French story, which allows the seducer to succeed in both instances, Holcroft causes him to be exposed and ridiculed. The novel reserves this fate for the chief plotter, the Marquise de Merteuil.

In spite of Holcroft's reputation as a champion of sentimental drama, this product of 1785 is comedy in the strictest sense. There is here neither an exhibition of virtue or distress. Moreover, faults and vices are not condoned, but are ridiculed and satirized. Nor are there any last-act conversions. When the final curtain falls, Sir Frederick is as mercilessly exposed as is Fainall in *The Way of the World*. Finally, the basis of entertainment, as in comedy at its best, is wit and satire. Though not arrestingly brilliant, scenes such as 2. 9 and 3. 3, are battles of wit; and the number of references to satire and wit, such as the following, indicate that Holcroft was consciously striving to infuse into his work this characteristic of the true comedy of manners:

Sir Frederick. I protest your ladyship is prodigiously brilliant today.

Lady Morden. No, no; though I am a vast admirer of wit. A person of wit has one very peculiar and enviable advantage. . . . A wit has more ideas, consequently lives longer in one hour than a fool in seven years (3. 2).

Besides, General Burland, who attempts to preach to Lord Morden and Sir Frederick, is represented not only as ineffectual, but is characterized by Lady Morden thus: "His head is full of—windmills, to grind out moral sentiments" (3. 3). And when Lord Morden finally lectures his wife, she banters him in the presence of Sir Frederick (4. 3):

Lady Morden. . . . Sir Frederick, if you had but come a little sooner, you would have heard the most delightful morality!

Sir Frederick. Ha, ha, ha! Morality from my lord?

Lord Morden. Yes, sir, morality from my lord!

Lady Morden. . . . Nay, I assure you, he is quite serious. (*Retires, coquetting with Sir Frederick.*)

The English Review (10.251) noted these qualities and remarked that "although this play has much merit, the dialogue is seldom that of genteel life; there is in it a superfluity of studied wit; and even the poor servants are witty."

Though *Seduction* thus indicates that Holcroft at this period at least had definitely sided with laughing comedy and that his ambition was to write "elegant comedy," as Hazlitt assures his readers, he did not hesitate to use the stage for a purpose "far nobler . . . than the mere incitement of risibility." But the "nobler purpose" in this instance was not vitiated by the inherent deficiencies of sentimentalism, nor by the uncomic expedient of exhibiting virtue; on the contrary it was in line with the reform advocated by Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*; that is, it aimed to make comedy really serve its traditional purpose of holding the glass of reality up to men and manners, or, as Ben Jonson put it, to make the stage further "the principal end of poesy, to inform men in the best reason of living." This passage is from Holcroft's preface:

The theatre, however, it may be debased by the nightly intrusion of unhappy and improper persons, has a most powerful and good influence on morals, which increases with industry, and as the means of gaining admission among the lower class increase. Much time is spent there to the best, the noblest, of purposes; the body's fatigues are forgotten, the mind is beguiled of its cares, the sad heart is made merry, fictitious sorrow obliterates real, and the soul, imbibing virtuous and heroic principles, is roused and impelled to actions that honour not only individuals but nations, and give dignity to human nature (ed. 1787, p. ii).

Seduction is a notable advance in dramatic workmanship. *Duplicity* is at best a welter of incidents, and the main plot and sub-plot are loosely joined and divergent in character. In this work, however, the sub-plot is completely eliminated, and the play is not only unified but the action is intelligible. That the author was consciously striving to observe the unities is evident from the prolog:

Tho' rules, alone, would yield a barren fame,
Such praise as rules can merit he may claim.
Each unity's preserv'd, nor knows the play
A lapse of time beyond the close of day.

Though it is thus an effective stage piece, and deserving of a revival were it not that the theme is outmoded by the present social standards, it is, nevertheless, weak in characterization and artificial in plot. The undoing of Sir Frederick is not effected by actions naturally arising from the characters involved, but by intercepted letters, disguises, and outside intervention. Were it not for the stratagems of Gabriel Wilmot, Sir Frederick's schemes to seduce Morden's wife and to elope with Emily would have been successful.

Since Holcroft's next original play appeared only after an interval of six years the interesting question arises whether his desire to use the stage as a school of morality set him so firmly against sentimentalized comedy that he remained silent rather than pander to the convenient tenets of sentimentalism. As already indicated, his tastes and writings, especially his verses and novels, prove he had a preference for satire. His theory, especially that of the preface to *Alwyn*, indicates that he aimed at real character delineation—something quite impossible if life is to be viewed sentimentally. Certain it is that in 1803 he decried the passing of satire as a feature of comedy (Prolog to *Hear Both Sides*):

Of modern plays are we not daily told
How very vile they are? Unlike the old
Strong sense, and sterling wit, of those bless'd days,
When bolder bards with glory won the bays!
The charge, alas! contains too much truth!
This the old age of wit, and that the youth!
The scourge of satire now we dare not use:
We dread newspapers, magazines, reviews.

In 1805 he again complained against the prevailing unwillingness to view life realistically. When explaining certain alterations in his moderately successful melodrama, *The Lady of the Rock*, he remarks that "hardened villainy is so offensive to public feeling . . . that on the first night the death of Dugald put the piece in some little danger." He ends his discussion with the somewhat bitter remark that he made changes because "dramatic authors must not reason, but comply with the public feeling." In the same year when reviewing *The School for Reform* by Thomas Morton, he objected to the characterization, saying, "There is a mixture of virtue and vice, in all men

... and when servants, bailiffs, jailors, and all classes of people, are described as sentimental ... these precious qualities become too common."¹³ Furthermore, he would have such as are sentimental drawn realistically. He concludes his "Essay on Dramatic Composition," discussing, as it does, the relative moral influence of comedy and tragedy, thus:

Comedy has a much wider range, can insinuate precepts by such familiar and multifarious means, and enforce them so powerfully by satire and ridicule, that it might become a most incomparable engine, for the destruction of vice, if properly employed in dramatic poetry. . . . If Moliere be taken into account, we should say the comic muse has far outstripped her sister [in moral efficacy] (*Theatrical Recorder* 1. 142).

In another part of the essay, which appeared by installments, he attempts to expose the false reasoning underlying the aversion to comedy:

It has been strangely maintained, by all adversaries of the drama, and even by some of its friends, that because comedy is employed to exhibit *folly* and portray *vice*, it is the friend of folly and vice (*ibid.* 1. 215).

He ends this discussion of the moral value of comedy with the remark that comedy holds the first place "because a thing laughed at is a thing despised," and thus explicitly denies Richard Steele's contention that

Laughter's a distorted passion, born
Of sudden self-esteem and sudden scorn.

Finally, he classed sentimental comedies lower than either tragedy or comedy, calling them "plays," which, he said, hold only a third place in moral utility.¹⁴ Besides, even in 1790, he singled out Congreve and Molière as the masters of comedy.¹⁵ It thus seems abundantly established that all of Holcroft's prepossessions, talent, and theory, were in keeping with the comic spirit.

¹³ Holcroft, *The Theatrical Recorder*, London, 1 (1805). 133.

¹⁴ "Serious scenes may very properly find their place in comedy; but, when they over-power laughter, humorous incidents, and comic character, the piece is properly classed among plays" (*ibid.* 1. 213).

¹⁵ Holcroft, *Preface to . . . Works of Frederick*, 1790, 2, p. vii.

2

After a silence of six years, Holcroft again emerged with a play, *The School for Arrogance* (1791)—radical and somewhat sentimental in character. The sentimentalism, however, is strikingly forced. The whole play up to the closing act, excepting a few references to nobility of nature and a few appeals to pity and the introduction of the usual lay-figures, is conducted in the comic manner. The interest of the play arises primarily from the ridicule heaped upon two noblemen, and upon sensual Sir Paul Peckham and his wife, ignorant and proud Lady Peckham.

Two men of rank sue for the hand of Lucy Peckham, the daughter of newly rich middle-class parents who bought a title. Count Connolly, enormously proud, considers his offer a condescension, and Sir Samuel, exceedingly humble, makes his offer ridiculous. Lucy consequently despises both. Convinced that virtue alone constitutes true nobility, she will favor neither until the pretensions based upon birth have been put aside. Lucy's father prefers the count, not only for his supposed wealth but also to thwart the plans of his wife. Lady Peckham, favoring Sir Samuel, carries the fight against the count. While the suitors are engaged in a duel, the count's father, Dorimont, appears in disguise. He schools his son in humility by writing him insulting letters and by turning up in situations when the count is eager to impress people. Disguised as a servant, he saves his daughter, Lydia, from the schemes of Sir Paul Peckham, who, aping the vices of men of rank, designs to make her his kept-woman. He is seconded in this by Peckham's son, Edmund, the "conscious lover" of Lydia. Dorimont makes himself known to the count at the very moment when Lucy's father, Peckham, is negotiating the marriage. The count acknowledges Dorimont his father. The play ends happily even for the count, because Dorimont, besides regaining his fortune, succeeds with the help of Lucy and Edmund in convincing the count and all the misguided characters that true distinction and riches are things of the mind. The count thus marries Lucy, and Edmund marries Lydia.

The plot of *The School for Arrogance*, as the preface acknowledges, is taken from *Le Glorieux* (1732) by Philippe Nericault

Destouches (1680-1754). Admitting that he took "the plan, several of the characters, and some of the scenes" from the French drama, he adds that the count has little resemblance to the original, that Lucy and the faithful servant, MacDermot, are entirely different, and that "Lady Peckham is a new character suggested by a friend." As the plot shows, there are here the usual lay-figures of sentimental comedy: the guide-philosopher, represented here by Dorimont, father of the count, and by MacDermot; the faithful servant, MacDermot; the reclaimed prodigal, the count, of whom his sister Lydia says, "I believe him to be generous, benevolent, and noble of heart, though his habitual haughtiness gives him the appearance of qualities the very reverse" (2.1); high-minded or "conscious lovers," Lucy, Lydia, and Edmund; and the girl orphan, Lydia. But interest in their welfare and admiration for their virtues does not, as in *The Conscious Lovers*, constitute the main entertainment. On the contrary, the sentimentalized concept of life pervades only the father's efforts to humble his son. The play thus is an inverted sentimental comedy, inasmuch as its serious features hold a secondary place. Apparently Holcroft was learning how to strike a compromise between the comedy of manners and sentimentalism.

The hearing accorded *The School for Arrogance* justified his compromise; for there was no unpleasant quarreling to get the play staged or to allow it to take its run. In fact, the piece was so well received that though a certain Mr. Marshal (presumably James Marshal) fathered the piece, Holcroft acknowledged it on the second night. Its first performance was at Covent Garden February 4, 1791. It ran for nine nights during its first staging, and was used as an after-piece during the following season. It brought its author two hundred and eighty pounds as his share.¹⁰

Were the statement of Holcroft's borrowings taken literally, he should indeed be entitled to small credit for *The School for Arrogance*. A comparison, however, reveals that Holcroft infused the true English comic spirit into Destouches' formal, dull, and moralizing drama. *Le Glorieux* is sermonizing through-

¹⁰ Elbridge Colby, *Bibliography of Thomas Holcroft*, New York, 1922, p. 63. I am indebted to Professor Colby's *Bibliography* also for identifying the plays Holcroft published anonymously.

out; whereas the English version, though marred by occasional moralizings and though retaining the stock characters of sentimental plays, is real comedy up to the final act. It is an excellent example of Holcroft's attempt to conform to his own ideals of comedy and at the same time indulge the sentimental tastes of his audience; for though characterized by the traits of sentimentalism, it is, nevertheless, excellent entertainment and effective comedy. As a work of art, of course, it is open to the criticism that neither character nor life is presented truthfully.

In conforming to the diverging tastes, Holcroft not only heightened the sentimental situations and characteristics of the original, but augmented and added comic scenes. The count, as the author contends, has little resemblance to the original inasmuch as he is presented as a man of feeling; in *Destouches* he is proud, arrogant, and totally insensible to humanitarian impulses up to the last scene when he unaccountably melts under the impact of filial love. In Holcroft, devotion to his poverty-stricken father, love for the innocent and noble-minded Lucy, and compassion and generosity toward the faithful servant characterize him throughout and thus help to make the *dénouement* more plausible by far than that of the original. In the French play sheer pride and arrogance make the count unwilling to recognize his poverty-stricken father; in Holcroft this unwillingness proceeds from the extenuating circumstance that he must choose between his father and Lucy. Moreover, his love for Lucy is more genuine, for he is really torn between love and aristocratic ideals; in the French work the proud count negotiates for Lucy as if she were a mere chattel. In the French version, moreover, this leading character is a slave master; whereas Holcroft's reformed prodigal is generous and kind toward his servant, MacDermot. In *Le Glorieux* the count betrays no shame for striking Pasquin, the servant, who brings him an insulting letter; on the contrary, he immediately commands him to count his gambling winnings, and then abuses him for theft; in *The School for Arrogance*, benevolence overcomes pride to such an extent that the count makes amends by giving him money.

Besides changing the leading character from a hardened, unscrupulous, and avaricious villain who is nevertheless *said* to have a good heart, to one dramatically presented as mis-

guided but benevolent, Holcroft added other features peculiar to sentimental comedy. The most notable are: changing the servant, Pasquin, into the guide-philosopher, MacDermot; heightening the trials of "the defenceless orphan," Lydia; and giving greater prominence to the "poor father." These changes, besides adding appeal to the emotions, tend to make the action more plausible. It is of greater note, however, that he injected the spirit of comedy, heightened comic scenes, and, what is most significant, added comic incidents and a highly humorous character, Lady Peckham, Holcroft's masterpiece in characterization and comparable to the creations of Congreve and Sheridan. Sombre French passages, like the following clash between the middle class and the nobility, are infused with English robustiousness bordering on farce and caricature. In *Le Glorieux* we read (2. 15):

Lisimon, à Pasquin. Le comte de Tufière est-il ici, mon coeur?

Pasquin. Oui, Monsieur, le voici. (*Le comte se lève nonchalamment, et fait un pas au-devant de Lisimon qui l'embrasse.*)

Lisimon. Cher comte, serviteur.

Le Comte, à Pasquin. Cher comte! nous voilà grands amis, ce me semble.

Lisimon. Ma foi, je suis ravi que nous logions ensemble.

Le Comte, froidement. J'en suis fort aise aussi.

Lisimon. Parbleu, nous boirons bien.

Vous buvez sec, dit-on? Moi, je n'y laisse rien.

Je suis impatient de vous verser rasade,

Et ce sera bientôt. Mais êtes-vous malade?

A votre froide mine, à votre sombre accueil. . . .

Le Comte, à Pasquin qui présente un siège.

Faites asseoir monsieur. . . . Non, offrez le fauteuil.

Il ne le prendra pas; mais. . . .

Lisimon. Je vous fais excuse.

Puisque vous me l'offrez, trouvez bon que j'en use;

Que je m' étale aussi; car je suis sans façon;

Mon cher, et cela doit vous servir de leçon;

Et je veux qu' entre nous toute cérémonie,

Dès ce même moment, pur jamais soit bannie.

The corresponding scene in *The School for Arrogance* runs thus (2. 2):

Sir Paul. (On the stairs.) Is the count at home, young man?

Footman. (Without.) Yes, sir.

Edmund. I hear my father! We have had a fracas; I must

escape! If you will come and listen to my sister's lecture, so—Good morrow! [Exit.]

Count. 'Tis insufferable! Never, sure, did man of my rank run the gauntlet thus! No respect— No distinction of persons! But with people of this class 'tis ever so— Hail, fellow, well met! (*Enter Sir Paul.*)

Sir Paul. Ay! Hail, fellow, well met!—Hey! You jolly dog! (*Shaking him heartily by the hand.*)

Count. Hem! Good—good morrow, sir! (*Aside.*) Here is another family lecturer.

Sir Paul. Was not that young Mock-modesty that brushed by me on the stairs?

Count. It was your son, sir.

Sir Paul. Good morning, sir! (*Mimicking*) said the scoundrel, when he was out of my reach. Damme! (*With a kick.*) I would have shewn him the shortest way to the bottom!—Well—Hey! You have elegant apartments here!

Count. (*With contempt.*) Very indifferent, sir.

Sir Paul. I shall remain in town for a fortnight, and am glad you live so near.—We'll storm the wine-cellar!—I hear you are no flincher!—Hey! When shall we have a set-to? Hey! When shall we have a rorytory? A catch, and a toast, and a gallon a man—But, hey! What's the matter? An't you well?

Besides breathing life into the dialog and the characters, Holcroft quite consistently changed the obviously sermonizing passages into ironic dialog. Moreover, moralizing scenes, when taken over, were shortened. But the most important change is the addition of the chief comic character, Lady Peckham. She is a glorified Lady Wishfort of *The Way of the World*, with a strong dash of Mrs. Malaprop. In *Le Glorieux* she is a mere name; in *The School for Arrogance* she carries the action with gusto. The process of her creation is easily traced. In the original most of the count's opposition comes from his love, Isabelle. This action, extracted from her character, went to the creation of Lady Peckham. Then Lisimon, the rich French bourgeois gentleman corresponding to Sir Paul Peckham, is shorn of some of his contrasting features in the process of building Lady Peckham. Clashes between her and the count constitute the play's highest entertainment and afford scope for satire, such as is exhibited in the following (3. 1):

Edmund. (*Warmly.*) Madam, I will pledge my life for the count's veracity.

L. Peckham. You pledge! What do you know about the matter?

I'll pledge that he has been telling a pack of the most monstrous—
Edmund. Forbear, madam. Such insult is too gross to be endured almost from any angry woman. Dear count—

L. Peckham. Voman again! Wery fine! Wery pretty! Voman quotha! To be called voman by my own witals!

Count. (Aside.) What have I done? (*With agony.*) A lie!

L. Peckham. As for you, sir, I doesn't believe von vord you say. I knows the tricks of such sham shevaleers as you too vell!

Count. (Walking away from her.) Torture!

L. Peckham. But I'll take care to have you prognosticated.

Count. (Aside.) Damnation!

L. Peckham. I'll have you karakatoored in your troo colours. I'll have you painted in your father's hall; you and your vooden shoe shrug and snuffle scarecrows; your half dozen lank and lean shotten herring shadows, vith the light shining through 'em, like parchment at a vorkshop vinder; grinning hunger over a dish of soup-meegur, vith a second course of frogs, and a plate of hedgeberries and crab-apples for the desert! I'll depicture you! I'll not forget your wassals!

Count. (Aside.) I can support it no longer. (*Going.*)

Edmund. (Catches him by the hand.) My dear count.

Count. Sir! I am a dishonoured villain! (*Exit.*)

Lady Peckham. There! There! He tells you himself he is a willin! His conscience flies in his face, and he owns it.

In addition to introducing Lady Peckham, Holcroft not only heightened the comic possibilities of certain of the original situations but protracted some and added others. Notable examples of lengthening good comedy are those in which the count wavers between denying his father and sacrificing Lucy (4.1), and in which the count must apologize to Lady Peckham before she will consent to the marriage (4.2). Examples of added scenes are: Sir Samuel's proposal to Lucy (5.1), and Lady Peckham's attack upon the count's pretended wealth in the scene quoted above. In the original this business is managed by an insipid dialog between two servants.

The success of *The School for Arrogance* apparently convinced Holcroft that opposition to sentimentalism and farce was futile and that the literary fame he ardently coveted could be won only by appealing to the heart and by introducing caricatures. This conjecture is supported by his next play, *The Road to Ruin*. Here he played up the farcical character Goldfinch and gave full rein to sentimentalism, resulting in a whirling torrent of emotion. Despite his now being forty-seven,

he so completely conformed to the public taste that, as Hazlitt says, the success of *The Road to Ruin* (C. G., Febr. 18, 1791) carried his "fame as a dramatic writer into every corner of the kingdom where there was a play-house. . . . It had a run greater than almost any other piece was ever known to have. . . . The profits he received from it were nine hundred pounds from Mr. Harris, and three or four hundred for the copy-right" (*Memoirs*, p. 122). The success of the piece is owing no doubt to the character Goldfinch and the whirl, the excitement, the breath-taking suspense, and the overpowering sentimentalism.

Harry Dornton, a wild, dashing, and noble-spirited youth, by extravagant charity and gambling threatens the stability of his father's banking firm. The father must choose between his son and financial disaster. The report that Harry has lost ten thousand at the Newmarket races, causes a run on the bank. At this point for the first time Harry adverts to his father's impending ruin. Prompted by filial love, he resolves, though in love with Sophia, to raise money by marrying her mother, a rich, hot-blooded widow. But the villain, Sulky, having gained possession of the will of the widow's late husband, plots to have Goldfinch marry the widow and thus gain her fortune. Mrs. Warren, the widow, relying on the favor of Sulky, whom she believes has the will in keeping, determines to marry Harry, and accordingly advances him six thousand pounds. The elder Dornton, moved by a love no less ardent than the revived love of his son, over-rides the advice of his associates, brushes aside the imminent danger of a business collapse, takes out a new loan, rushes to the widow, and saves Harry from marriage to her by repaying the six thousand she had advanced. But new debts await the father. Harry has just learned that his friend Milford is imprisoned, and to save his honor as a friend, expends five of the six thousand to free him. He then quarrels with Milford because of an insult offered his father. But the duel is averted; for Milford, learning in the nick of time that the elder Dornton was not responsible for the creditors' swooping down upon him, sends a cringing apology. In the meantime the Dornton firm is saved by a re-examination of the books, showing a safe margin, and by the fortune that comes to Sulky, Dornton's partner, because of the timely death of a relative. And to make every one share in the benevolent

rule of the universe, the plot of Goldfinch and Sulky is frustrated. Sophia, Harry's love, entreats pardon for all.

The Road to Ruin is the first of Holcroft's original plays and adaptations in which appears the genuine bourgeois appeal. The action centers round domestic relations and business interests. Though this was not new either to English tragedy or comedy, it was new to Holcroft. And the circumstance that he, whose theory as well as earlier practice favored real comedy, should have been swept down the stream of sentimentalism and should have appealed directly to the middle class indicates the growing strength of the middle-class demands even on the theater. Sentimentalism is so pervading a feature of this comedy that all the action turns round the paternal impulses of Dornton and of the high-minded filial love of Harry. Each dilemma between business prudence and paternal love is resolved by the impulses of the heart.

Love's Frailties (C. G., Febr. 5, 1794), following *The Road to Ruin*, took (as the advertisement explains) "various incidents and thoughts" from Otto F. Gemmigen's *Der Deutsche Hausvater* to build a play whose "fable, characters, and denouement are exceedingly different." Instead of the rounds of applause that greeted its predecessor, this play, as Holcroft contended, precipitated the beginning of "relentless opposition," because in the preface the following passage was "unwarily retained": "I was bred to the most useless and often most worthless, of all professions; that of a gentleman." Though a good acting piece and acknowledged such by the *Monthly* (13. 446), it ran only six nights.

Sir Gregory Oldwort, preaching respectability but practising libertinism, determines that his nephew, Seymour, marry the rich and aristocratic Lady Fancourt. Seymour's sister, Lady Louisa, also urges the match because her marriage to a lieutenant, "possessed of honour, worth, and virtue" rather than wealth has made her dependent on Seymour. Though Seymour is betrothed to Paulina, the daughter of a destitute nobleman, the pleading of his sister and the threats of his uncle prevail upon him to tell Paulina that he must break his engagement. While Paulina is distractedly pleading with him to be true to her, his eyes fall upon a painting representing the "progress of seduction, beginning in perjury and ending in suicide." Over-

come by remorse, Seymour vows to be true to her. In the meantime Lady Fancourt has been convinced by Paulina that true nobility is of the mind and that Seymour and Paulina are destined for one another. Interwoven with this action is Sir Gregory's plot to seduce Paulina. His designs are suspected by Muscadel, who, prompted by his wish to marry Lady Fancourt, compromises Sir Gregory and forces him to consent to Seymour's marrying Paulina. As this outline indicates, *Love's Frailties* has some of the features of real comedy. The design of the whole piece is to expose Sir Gregory's pretensions to respectability. His selfishness, heartlessness, and libertinism are effectually satirized. And that it is such, is owing to Holcroft, not to the original of Otto von Gemmingen. Besides creating the comic character Muscadel, Holcroft changed the virtuously stilted Hausvater into Sir Gregory—a worthy object of satire in that his pretensions to virtue are false. The features it has in common with tearful comedy are: Sir Gregory at the close is not only forced to acknowledge his vices but is made to reform; the distresses of the lovers, as in the original, are given prominence; Paulina's virtue is held up for admiration; and Seymour's devotion to his sister is rewarded.

The last of Holcroft's plays deserving of detailed consideration, before we turn to his melodramas, is *The Deserted Daughter* (C. G., May 2, 1795), given out as the work of Mrs. Inchbald. Despite Holcroft's acknowledging it as his soon after its appearance, this thoroughly sentimental comedy "had sixteen performances before the end of the year, benefits later, four editions in the year, and other editions in Ireland and America."¹⁷ It has some of the theatrical characteristics of *The Road to Ruin*. By his first wife, "a woman poor but virtuous," Mordent had a daughter, Joanna, for whom he secretly provides through his servant, Donald. After almost twenty years, pity for the disowned daughter somehow causes the servant to threaten to expose his master if he will not acknowledge his daughter. But rather than estrange his present wife, Lady Anne, still further, Mordent arranges to have his trusted but faithless servant, Item, settle Joanna in some profession. Unknown, however, to Mordent, Item sells her to Mrs. Enfield,

¹⁷ Colby, *Memoirs*, 2. 95.

the keeper of a brothel. Mrs. Enfield sends notice to both Mordent and his friend, Lennox, that she has a prize beauty for them. Both accept the invitation. Matters are complicated by Cheveril, a character so intensely sentimental as to be rather a caricature than a real young man just turned of age. Burning to do "one famous good wicked thing" "without being unprincipled," and "not by ensnaring the helpless," Cheveril is directed by Item to the brothel. Lennox arrives first, and, after paying Mrs. Enfield one hundred pounds, arranges to take Joanna with him, and sends her boy's clothes so that she can make her escape. Cheveril, having arrived on the heels of Lennox, decides to outwit him and thus establish his "character for spirit, soul, and intrepidity for ever." But struck by the lovely innocence of Joanna, he falls rapturously in love with her and schemes to free her. The action is further complicated by the arrival of Mordent. Joanna's pitiful enumeration of her woes so moves Mordent that he too resolves to free her, saying, "Come but with me, and, while I have a morsel, a home, or a heart, you shall share them." Hot on the heels of this resolve, Mordent learns that Joanna is his daughter. In the meantime Joanna, realizing she is in a brothel, escapes disguised as a boy. Mordent rushes to rescue her, only to be informed that she has already been decoyed to the arms of some libertine. In his agony he exclaims: "I the pander? I cast her shrieking on the bed of infamy, and chain her in the arms of lust? Her father do this?" As Mordent with the combined aid of all his servants frantically searches for Joanna, he comes upon Lennox, charges him with abduction and challenges him to a duel. But the welling up of benevolence overcomes him, and Mordent turns his pistol out of line. Their passions unaccountably subside long enough to allow Mordent to explain that Joanna is his daughter. The words have barely been uttered when both scurry off in search of the abducted Joanna. While wandering about in search of protection, Joanna meets Cheveril, who also seeks her. Joanna being disguised is not recognized by him, and when Mordent overhears him ask her if she knows where Joanna is, he rushes to the disguised girl, saying (5. 4):

Mordent. . . . She was my daughter!

Joanna. Sir!—Your daughter!—You? You my father?

Mordent. How?

Joanna. (*Falling at his feet and snatching his hand.*) Oh!
 Mordent. Can it be?—My child—?—My Joanna? (*Eagerly raising and regarding her again.*) It is! It is! (*Falling on her neck.*)
 Joanna. My father!
 Mordent. My child! And innocent?

The play closes with every one rejoicing in the benevolent rule of the universe whereby all things are worked out for the good of man. Mordent instead of being made to encounter the "resentful forbearance" of his wife, Lady Anne, finds her all joy because a long lost daughter has been reclaimed, and the financial ruin threatening Mordent is averted by the timely unmasking of his trusted but faithless servant.

Seven months after the successful staging of *The Deserted Daughter*, Holcroft came out with *The Man of Ten Thousand* (D. L., Jan. 23, 1796). No clue to its source has been found. It is strikingly inferior in characterization, plot, and dialog. How it enjoyed a run of seven nights and how it brought the author some two hundred and forty pounds is completely unintelligible; for the present-day reader will invariably react as did Wordsworth, "I have attempted to read Holcroft's *Man of Ten Thousand*, but such stuff."¹⁸ John Adolphus, however, explains this riddle when he says that the talents of the first comic actors of the day, Kemble, Bannister, Miss Farren, Miss Pope, and Mrs. Gibbs gave it whatever success it enjoyed, despite its being "a mere series of scenes, without plot or contrivance."¹⁹ The plot centers round Dorington, who after entertaining his friends profusely suddenly loses his fortune and his influence, and, with the fortune and the influence, his friends. But the hero, Dorington, continues unperturbed. His resignation is rewarded by the *deus ex machina*: the loss of fortune was only a false report.²⁰

The complete failure of *The Force of Ridicule*, it appears, discouraged Holcroft so thoroughly that he desisted from further dramatic efforts until January 25, 1798, when he suc-

¹⁸ G. M. Harper, *Wordsworth*, 2 vols., New York, 1923, 1. 289.

¹⁹ *Memoirs of John Bannister*, 2 vols., London, 1839, 1. 363.

²⁰ *The Force of Ridicule* (D. L., Dec. 6, 1796), his next play, was "perdurably damned" after the first night, according to James Boaden (*Memoirs of J. P. Kemble*, 2 vols., London, 1825, 1. 192). It was never published and I have not seen the manuscript. Its source is only hinted at by the *Biographica Dramatica* (2. 244-5), "It was, we believe, derived from the French."

ceeded in having Drury Lane stage his comedy, *Knave, or Not?* Its plot centers round the villain, Monrose, who determines to rise in the world by studying villainy. Though merely a poor parson's son, he pretends to be a foreign count, gets a position as tutor in a noble family, and there unmasks two noblemen who robbed an orphan to enhance their fortune. In the printed edition, dated February 1, 1798, the author acknowledges that "in the original sketch of this comedy, some hints were taken from *Il Raggiratore* [1756], *La Serva Amatora* [1752], and *Il Padre Di Famiglia* [1750] by Goldoni,"²¹ then adds, "but of these [hints], though he has not lately examined them, the author is persuaded so few traces remain that they are scarcely discoverable." This piece held the stage only four or five nights, because it was construed as an attack upon society.

Only two weeks elapsed after the comparative failure of *Knave, or Not?* before *He's Much to Blame*²² (C. G., Febr. 13, 1798) was staged. As the advertisement admits, Holcroft took some "hints" from *Le Complaisant* (1733) by De Ferriol Pont-de-Veyle and the *Clavigo* (1774) by Goethe. It enjoyed so great favor "that the King, not knowing the author . . . commanded it twice." Sir George Versatile while poor and enjoying the hospitality of the Delaval home, falls in love with Delaval's sister, Maria. When he comes into money, he casts Maria aside for Lady Jane Vibrate. Young Delaval resolves to avenge this injustice. Maria learning of her brother's resolve, disguises herself as a man and tries to prevent Delaval and Sir George from meeting. At a mask she thoroughly exposes the faithlessness of Sir George. He repents and the duel is averted. The inanities of Lady Vibrate, the mother of Jane, the pomposity of the German Doctor Gosterman, the caricatured irritability of Lord Vibrate, and the flippancy of Sir George lighten the tragic tone of this piece. Though the main action follows that of *Clavigo*, Holcroft rebuilt the characters, lightened the oppressive somberness of the German, accelerated the action, and substituted a happy ending; and, aided by "hints" from *Le Complaisant*, he added a greater variety of character,

²¹ I have not seen copies of these.

²² This play is attributed to Holcroft on the strength of this entry in his *Diary*, Aug. 1, 1798: "I informed [Mr. Griffiths, Jun.] that the comedy *He's Much to Blame* was written by me" (*Memoirs*, p. 190).

created the amusingly pompous, inquisitive, and obsequious German doctor, added new incidents and situations—all tending to make the play good comedy, redolent of amusing and even farcical situations. Holcroft thus succeeded admirably in welding the two plays into a rounded and pleasing comedy, calculated to please such as looked for sentimentalism as well as those who demanded mere entertainment.²³

3

In 1801 Holcroft sent from Paris *Deaf and Dumb; or, the Orphan Protected: an historical comedy* (D. L., Febr. 24, 1801), adapted from the French, *L'Abbé de l'Epée* by J. N. Bouilly.²⁴ Besides enjoying a run of nine successive nights and twenty-four additional presentations before the end of 1803, it was once played by command of George III.²⁵ The reason for its appeal is apparent from its plot. Julio, the heir of the Lord of Harancour, born deaf and dumb, is left an orphan when only eight. He is taken to Paris by his uncle and there abandoned. The child finds a refuge in Abbé de l'Epée's asylum. Julio's appearance leads to the suspicion that he has been robbed of his inheritance. After a long search on foot, the abbé and Julio find the palace where Julio was born. The guilty uncle, overcome with remorse, surrenders the estate after a violent internal conflict brought on by his son's threat to kill himself if his father does not acknowledge that he usurped young Julio's fortune.

The English stage was clearly heading toward melodrama. The emotional appeal, as a number of Holcroft's most successful works indicate, was becoming more pronounced, situations rather than character were being stressed, the abnormal was

²³ Since *The Inquisitor* (Haymarket, June 23, 1798), an adaptation of Johann C. Unzer's *Diego et Leonor*, throws no decisive light upon the main theme of this study I have for reasons of brevity omitted discussion of it here. No record of *Indian Exiles*, adapted from Kotzebue's *Die Indianer in America* (1791), remains except that it was completed by October, 1798. I have not seen the manuscripts of *The Old Clothesman* (C. G., April 2, 1799) and *The Escapes* (C. G., Oct. 14, 1801).

²⁴ I have not seen the play.

²⁵ Of its appeal John Adolphus wrote: "Savage indeed must the prejudices have been which could resist the charms with which this piece assailed the mind. The story, the sentiment, the interest, the gradual and judicious development of the final event, all contributed to produce an impulsive sensation not to be resisted by minds in the slightest degree capable of a virtuous emotion" (*Bannister* 2. 73).

replacing the ordinary, villains were responding more spontaneously to pity, happy *dénouements* were being forced with less regard for probability, and accidents were weaving halos of material prosperity for the virtuous. *The Road to Ruin* (1791), *The Deserted Daughter* (1795), *He's Much to Blame* (1798), and *Deaf and Dumb* (1801) indicate an increasing love of mystery, a heightening of emotional situations, an increase of pantomime action, and a tendency toward the arbitrary reward of virtue. Furthermore, they indicate, in the main, that the villain, though heartless and malicious, is nevertheless yielding with greater spontaneity to the impulses of natural goodness; the orphans are being placed in more distressful situations, and the benevolent protector is becoming more self-sacrificing. In *Deaf and Dumb*, for example, the protecting hero embraces Julio, invokes Heaven for protection, and then sets out with him on a long journey. They wearily push on until they arrive at Toulouse. Here Julio seizes his guide's hand, utters cries of joy, hurriedly leads him through the city to the palace where he was born. Then Julio stops suddenly, shrieks, falls senseless into the arms of his protector. This piece even required some of the elaborate and spectacular setting presumably borrowed from the romantic operas. The chief of these is a bridge scene with a church steeple in the background. Such obviously was the taste of English audiences when Holcroft gave the English the first dramatic production technically to become known as melodrama.

A Tale of Mystery (C. G., Nov. 13, 1802) is an adaptation of the first French melo-drame, *Coelina; ou l'Enfant du mystère* (1800) by Guilbert de Pixérécourt. It ran for thirty-six nights during its first season. Both contemporary evidence²⁶ and the findings of scholars acknowledge it the first melodrama as such to be presented on any English stage.²⁷ The curtain rises on Bonamo expecting the rich and powerful Count Romaldi, who

²⁶ Genest (7. 579) calls it "the first of those melodramas, with which the stage was afterwards inundated," and adds that it was the best of them. Boaden (*Kemble* 2. 331) records, "the speaking music by Dr. Busby and the good acting rendered it very excellent." He recognized it as something new in that he called it "an opera in prose, which is merely spoken; and in which music discharges the duty of a *valet de chambre*, because her office is simply to announce the actors."

²⁷ Nicoll, p. 98; and Ernest B. Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson*, Cambridge, 1926, p. 350.

is coming to arrange the marriage of his son to Selina, an orphan, fathered by Bonamo. To make room for the distinguished guest, Bonamo, the master of the castle, issues orders to turn out the poor mute beggar, Francisco, taken in by the servants. Fiametta, the old faithful serving maid, and Selina, the orphan, plead for Francisco, contending they instinctively know he is noble. Bonamo yields and allows Francisco to tell his story in writing. Francisco makes it known that his tongue has been cut out at the instigation of a rich and powerful nobleman whose name he conceals.

With the stage thus set, the villain, Romaldi, enters, and Francisco slinks from the room. Romaldi, after recovering from a momentary embarrassment occasioned by a glimpse of Francisco, proceeds to arrange the marriage of his son and Selina. But Bonamo refuses to force Selina's consent. Angered by this, Romaldi accuses Bonamo of trying to keep the rich orphan for his nephew, Stephen, who loves Selina. He threatens that if by ten o'clock on the following morning he does not gain consent to force Selina into the marriage, he will reveal a secret which will affect the lives of all of the Bonamo household. Though suspicion is rife, all except Selina retire for the night. As she stands guard over Francisco, she spies Romaldi and his servant with drawn daggers stealing upon him. Her screams rouse the house.

With the villain thus exposed, the second act presents Bonamo hurriedly arranging the marriage of Stephen and Selina. But in the midst of the picturesque scene, enlivened by music, dancing, and general festivity, comes Romaldi's accusation that Selina is the "child of crime! of adultery!" and that Francisco is the author of her disgrace. Enraged Bonamo drives Francisco and Selina out into the raging storm. The victims have no more than left, when Montano arrives. Bursting in upon Bonamo, he tells him that Romaldi is the brother of Francisco, is an imposter, is the adulterer, the debaucher of Francisco's wife, the villain who had Francisco's tongue cut out and attempted to kill him "one dark night in a deep mountain pass." Everyone rushes out into the terrifying storm to find Selina and her father.

The closing act presents Romaldi struggling against the upheavals of outraged Nature—all the while pleading for mercy

and pardon. He finally takes refuge in the hut of the very miller who sheltered Francisco the night his tongue was cut out. For the sake of theatricalism, the storm forces Francisco and Selina also to seek shelter in the hut. As Francisco enters, Romaldi points his pistol at him. Francisco bares his breast, and his daughter throws herself between the pistol and her father. Romaldi puts up his weapon, groaning with remorse, "No! Too much blood is upon my head! Be justly avenged: take mine!" Francisco hurls the proffered pistol down the mountain side, urges Romaldi to flee, and, when he finds Romaldi overpowered by the pursuing archers, he and Selina throw themselves time after time between the swords of the archers and their victim, Romaldi, and thus save his life.

Except for such unimportant changes as making Stephen the nephew instead of son of Bonamo, the action of the highly successful melodrama—but to us, cinema-like thriller—follows that of *Coelina*. But it is not a mere translation;²⁸ it is an adaptation to English theatrical taste, inasmuch as Holcroft notably heightened the benevolence of the virtuous, blackened the diabolical villain, accentuated the emotional situations, and, perhaps most noticeably, added features to make it a more theatrical stage piece. The atmosphere of mystery is increased by the instinctive terror excited by the villain, by the increased tempo of the dialog, by the expanded pantomime action, by

²⁸ Some of the most striking changes are: Francisco urged by Bonamo to tell the truth: in *Coelina* (1. 5), *Francisque témoigne qu'il est incapable de mentir*, and in *A Tale of Mystery* (1. 1), "With dignity, points to heaven and his heart"; in *Coelina*, Francisco grapples with the attacking Romaldi in the miller's hut, whereas in Holcroft he bares his breast to the pointed pistol, causing Romaldi to groan with remorse and offer to let Francisco kill him; Selina in *Coelina* struggles against the forced marriage because it will separate her from Stephen whom she loves, but in the English play she dreads to become the victim of avarice and thus outrage true love; in the French she screams with terror when Romaldi crouches toward her sleeping father, but in *A Tale of Mystery* she rouses the house with her screams and shields her aged father with her body; Bonamo in the original appeases his sense of benevolence by tossing a purse to innocent Selina when he drives her and her father into the storm, but in the adaptation Bonamo wavers and cries out to the father, "Hold, miserable man,—[To himself] Houseless—pennyless—without bread—without asylum—must she perish because her father has been wicked"; Fiametta remonstrates more boldly and forcefully with her master because of the cruelties shown Francisco and Selina; instances of increased pantomime action as in the stage directions to Act 1, Sc. 1 of *A Tale of Mystery* and Act 1, Sc. 15 of *Coelina*; finally, short Romantic touches are added by Holcroft, invariably emphasizing the wild and picturesque nature-setting as at the opening of Act 2, Sc. 3.

more extensive and specific musical accompaniment, by intensifying and protracting the storm, by Francisco's refusal to reveal the name of his family and by his remark that his name has been disgraced.

In order to understand Holcroft and to make valid inferences on the English taste in his time it is necessary again to emphasize that the author of *A Tale of Mystery* was merely trying to get a successful piece on the stage.²⁹ Though this would seem to be a thoroughly substantiated fact in the light of his life as a whole, students of eighteenth-century drama are as unanimous in designating him an active propagator of melodrama as in describing him the champion of sentimental comedy.³⁰ But his theory was as strongly opposed to melodrama as it was to sentimental comedy. When writing of melodrama in his *Theatrical Recorder* (1.215), he deprecated its slight moral usefulness, explaining that "because of the time given to music" and because of the "strong portion of insipidity which has always prevailed, their moral utility is still further lessened." Obviously he had to go with the stream of popular taste. Many bitter failures made him realize that he must either side with sentimentalism or sink into oblivion and utter poverty. The contrast, then, between his theory and the reputation he has gained as a champion of sentimentalism and as the chief propagator of melodrama is an excellent proof of the force of the flood of sentimentalism rushing in as one of the salient features of the Romantic Movement.

By 1805 Holcroft had *The Lady of the Rock* (D. L., Febr. 12) ready for staging.³¹ The "subject and part of the story" of this attempt at original melodrama, according to the preface, was taken from Mrs. Murray's *Guide to the Western Islands of Scotland*. *The Lady of the Rock* affords proof that Holcroft

²⁹ For a tracing of the melodramatic features of English plays from 1770 see Nicoll, p. 98 ff.; in French plays, see Alexander Lacey, *Pixerécourt and the French Romantic Drama*, Toronto, 1928.

³⁰ Bernbaum, *Drama of Sensibility*, p. 267; Nicoll, p. 135; A. H. Thorndyke, *English Comedy*, N. Y., pp. 459-63.

³¹ *Hear both Sides* (D. L., Jan. 29, 1803), a play in the "honest attorney" fashion given a vogue by Frederick Reynolds, was condemned by the critics as a "sombre sermonizing drama." The dull, insipid *Vindictive Man* (D. L., Nov. 20, 1806) based on *L'Heritage, conte morale et dramatique* by M. Bret was hooted off the stage, according to Lamb. Neither modifies the facts of this study and may accordingly be dismissed without discussion.

either did not fully understand the recipe for successful melodrama or was still bent on making the stage a school for sound morality. This piece, though running nine nights, got off to a bad start the first night because, as the preface explains, its villain was not allowed a miraculous deathbed conversion and the heroine was not sufficiently immaculate. The "lovely little girl," as the same preface tells, was fashioned too much in conformity with human frailty and real life in that she "innocently betrayed her mother." Both of these departures from the set form of melodrama "put the piece in some slight danger" when it was first presented. Again he was forced to realize, as he acknowledged in the preface, that "dramatic authors must not reason, but comply with the public feeling." Accordingly, he so altered the piece that "the hardened villainy . . . so offensive to public feeling" conformed to the melodramatic pattern, and he even "curtailed the part of the child" in order to make her idealistically faultless.

In concluding this study of Holcroft's plays, I may observe that time and the judgment of succeeding ages have justly assigned Holcroft to the rank his stage productions merit—a minor dramatist of the last decade of the eighteenth century. *The Road to Ruin*, and possibly *Seduction*, *The Deserted Daughter*, and *The School for Arrogance* alone would repay the present-day general reader's interest; and *The Road to Ruin* alone threatened to give him lasting fame. Despite these negations, Holcroft has a clear claim, because of his adaptation of *A Tale of Mystery*, to whatever questionable fame resides in having introduced French melodrama as such into England. In himself, then, he is merely typical of the playwrights who were plundering foreign models and adapting them more or less successfully to English taste.

Insignificant as these claims are, a study of Holcroft has, nevertheless, been illuminating; for his preface to *Duplicity* is new evidence of the strength of the revolt against sentimental comedy as well as proof that Goldsmith and Sheridan were, for the most part, successful in spite of the ebbing tide of the comedy of manners, which succeeded in living on only in the form of farce; and that even as early as 1785 the only road to dramatic success was to depict life in caricature and sentimentally. His works show that despite his prepossessions, his

talent, his theory, and his militant disposition, he was forced to indulge more and more the ever-growing taste for weeping comedy. They show, furthermore, that nothing short of melodrama would satisfy. Lastly, a study of his works indicates that no individual writer need necessarily have been the champion of sentimental comedy, for the stream of sentimentalism had broken down all barriers and was rushing onward in spite of literary theories. The middle-class tastes thus were no longer influencing only the novel and the periodical; they were dominating the stage and had become so strong as to over-rule opposition even so dogged as that of Holcroft, who, though favoring genuine comedy, has gone down in dramatic history as one of the chief exponents of sentimentalism.

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VITA

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